

Joseph Grinnell Mansion

HABS No. MASS-675

(now St. John's Roman Catholic Convent and Academy)
379 County Street (west side, at head of Russell Street)
New Bedford
Bristol County
Massachusetts

HABS
MASS,
3-NEBED,
9-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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JOSEPH GRINNELL MANSION
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Address: 379 County Street (west side, at head of Russell Street) New Bedford, Bristol County, Massachusetts

Present Owner: Roman Catholic Church (Church of St. John the Baptist), County Street, New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Present Occupant: St. John's Convent and Academy

Present Use: Classroom and recreation building

Statement of Significance: An imposing granite mansion of the 1830's, typifying the homes of the leaders of business and society in New Bedford at the height of its prosperity. Design attributed to the architect, Russell Warren.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: "Land was owned by Robert S. Smith who conveyed the same in 1830 to Joseph Grinnell and the latter built the house in 1836. It was later purchased from his heirs by Frederick Grinnell, his nephew, and his widow occupies the property in 1907." Worth, Palmer and Austin, "Old Dartmouth", pp. 281-282. More recently acquired by the Roman Catholic Church.
2. Date of erection: 1836. ibid.
3. Architect, builder, suppliers, etc.: Architect said to have been Russell Warren Z. W. Pease, The Centenary of the Merchants National Bank (New Bedford, Mass., 1925), p. 27. Augustus A. Greene was foreman of construction "Old Dartmouth," pp. 281-282. Quincy Granite supplied by Solomon Willard Society of Architectural Historians, New Bedford, Mass., August 17-20, 1961, p. 5.
4. Original plans, construction, etc.: Central hall, with two main rooms each side; front portico; rear service wing from observation.
5. Notes on alterations and additions: In adapting for use as an academy, the stairway was removed, and a new one

at the entrance substituted. A brick stair tower was added at the rear. Partitions were removed on the north side of the third floor. Safety doors were installed in the halls. Other than that, the building appears to have been little altered, basically /from observation/.

6. Important old views and references:

- a. Small plan of estate, in 1881 atlas, before modern alterations. /Atlas of New Bedford City, Massachusetts (Boston: George H. Walker & Co., 1881), plate 77
- b. Worth, Palmer and Austin, "Old Dartmouth," a manuscript in the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, Johnny Cake Hill, New Bedford, Mass. This consists of photographs of houses and public buildings in New Bedford, Fairhaven, Acushnet, Dartmouth and Westport; photographs by Fred W. Palmer, introduction and notes by Henry B. Worth, "done into shape" by Emma C. Austin; dated September, 1907.
- c. Leonard Bolles Ellis, History of New Bedford and its Vicinity, 1602-1892 (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1892), part II, biographical.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: The original owner, Joseph Grinnell, spent eight years in the House of Representatives, Washington, D. C. /Ellis, op. cit./

C. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: Records of the Church of St. John the Baptist might contain further information about the conversion to an academy.

The S.A.H. August 1961 booklet mentions a letter from S. Willard to Grinnell. This could probably be located through the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, New Bedford, Mass., and might give further details about the granite supplied for construction.

Surviving members of the Grinnell family might be able to add further information.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: An imposing granite mansion with a monumental Greek Doric portico, austere on the exterior, containing refined Greek Revival interior details in spite of substantial alterations.
2. Condition of fabric: Good. Structure appears very sound, and finish is reasonably well maintained, although the portico needs minor repairs.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Over-all dimensions: Main block, approximately 51' x 51', rear wing 33' long; portico 10' x 33' Fronts east. Three stories.

2. Foundations: granite ashlar (see Walls, below). Smooth.
3. Wall construction: ashlar of Quincy granite, courses 11" high, 1/2" joints, some pieces up to 8' long. Rough faced. 1'-8" thick. The third floor wall is of wood, with pilasters between windows.
4. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: Two-story wooden Greek Doric portico on east front; four columns, 16-fluted. Columns are built up, of sixteen pieces around the circumference; joints occur in the center of each flute. Each wood piece measures 2 1/4" x 6 1/2" in section, near the base of the column. Soffit of architrave is ornamented with a large fret; inner side of architrave reaches to porch ceiling, ornamented with a row of guttae. Porch floor is concrete and granite, with granite steps. A terrace surrounds the portico on three sides, paved with large granite slabs, up to 5'-6" x 15'-6" x 6 1/2" thick. Granite steps lead down to the ground on the east and north sides of the terrace.

There is a small granite terrace and steps at the southwest corner.

5. Chimneys: Two now in evidence--one near northwest corner, and one at northwest corner of rear wing.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Entrance doorway has a simple masonry opening, with monolithic blocks at jambs. Double doors, with a panel over them. Original state of this doorway undetermined.
 - b. Windows and shutters: Double hung wood sash, six light over six light, except for three light over three light on third story. Some louvred shutters remain; there is evidence that shutters were general at one time. Window openings have monolithic jamb blocks, lintels and sills.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: undetermined.
 - b. Cornice, eaves: At the top of the second story, a granite cornice, matching that of the portico, continues around the house. Its upper member, an echinus moulding, is of wood. The third floor is crowned by a smaller wooden cornice. Round copper conductors, one near each corner.
 - c. Dormers, cupolas: None.

C. Technical Description of Interior

Only features which appear to be original are described here.

1. Floor plans: each floor apparently had a central hall, and two rooms on each side. The rear wing is two stories high.
2. Wall and ceiling finish: generally plaster, painted. Good condition.
3. Doorways and doors: most appear original. Typically, doors are 1 3/4" thick, three-panel. Square moulded panels at top and bottom are separated by a narrow horizontal panel in the middle. Those on the first floor are mahogany; others are painted. There are sliding double doors between the front and rear parlors on the south side. Third floor doors are five-panel.
4. Trim: door and window trim typically is of wood, rather wide, with corner blocks. Corner blocks on first floor are carved with oak leaf motif in the parlors; on the upper floors they are simple paneled blocks. There are wide base boards, with mouldings, and simple chair rails throughout.

Southwest parlor, first floor: The east wall terminates in a half-ellipse in plan, with four Greek Ionic columns and full entablature, mostly of wood. The plaster cornice continues around the room.

Northwest parlor: This room retains a delicate plaster cornice; the ceiling is paneled, with a rosette in the center. At the west wall, on center, is a mantel having two Ionic columns with full entablature. Marble surrounds the fireplace opening; there is a marble hearth. The fireplace is lined with cast iron, painted, paneled and ornamented with a double acanthus motif in each panel. Over the mantel are two antae carrying a full entablature. This frames a three-part mirror, with colonnettes.

This room retains paneled interior shutters (missing from most other rooms). The doors are trimmed with an architrave moulding.

5. Hardware: Typically two silver-plated brass butts on each door. Silver-plated keyhole covers, mortice locks. Door knobs on first floor are silver-plated, those on upper floors are of glass, silvered inside.
6. Interior ceiling heights: first floor, about 11'-6", second floor about 11'-6", third floor 8'-5 1/2".

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: On the hill or plateau overlooking the older part of the town and harbor to the east. The lot is large, with the house fronting east.
2. Enclosures: Across the front on County Street is a cast and wrought iron fence, with a spear head at the top of each rod. Gate posts are granite. The double gate is wrought iron.
3. Outbuildings: An 1881 atlas indicates a wooden outbuilding a short distance west of the house, and two others at the northwest corner of the lot. These are not in existence now.

A large social center and a school building, erected recently, occupy space at the south and west, respectively, now.

4. Walks, driveways, etc.: On the 1881 atlas are shown drives forming a circle east of the house, and around the house, with an entrance driveway from the site of the present gateway connecting to them. No trace of these is visible now. A paved driveway, obviously modern, extends straight from the gateway, north of the house.
5. Landscaping: Informal planting exists today; there is no indication of any particular landscape treatment other than mentioned above.

Prepared by Harley J. McKee, Architect
National Park Service
August 1961